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SECRECY AND DEMOCRACY: The CIA in Transition

By Stansfield Turner.

Sidgwick & Jackson. 304 pages. £12.95.
Available from Houghton Mifflin.

Admiral Stansfield Turner always thought big. When he was in the American navy he was often accused—not always wrongly—of being more concerned with “tomorrow’s navy” than with today’s. He never got to the top of it; instead, President Carter shunted him off to the CIA.

It was predictable that, in writing about his time there, he should try to do several things at once. He tells fascinating tales of his experiences as director of the CIA and as director of central intelligence (DCI), the job of co-ordinating all the American intelligence agencies. (The two jobs have gone together ever since the CIA was established.) But he also grapples with two other vital issues: how to deal with the cumbersome American intelligence organisation; and how to reconcile the secrecy and ethics of intelligence work with the democratic ideal.

The story of his appointment and disappointments as President Carter’s intelligence chief is probably the best account yet written of the inner workings of the intelligence organisation of a world power. If Mr Turner does not reveal everything the reader might want to know (he was hamstrung not only by legitimate security restraints, but by the requirement to clear his text with the present CIA, which appears to have introduced some illegitimate ones as well), he tells much more than any of his predecessors. The story of the wrongheaded treatment of a Russian defector by Mr James Angleton, who was for years a power in the CIA, has been partly told before, but Mr Turner’s account is more powerful—and interesting—both because of its basis in fact and the straight talk that has always been his trademark.

Mr Turner had his share of problems with colleagues from other intelligence organisations. Partly these were professional disagreements, such as the perennial dispute between the “classic” school of intelligence, which believes that diligent research and spies still have their uses, and the electronic operators, who are mostly convinced that nothing apart



Turner has tales to tell

from technical methods of collecting information matters any more. Within the CIA, the intelligence collectors and clandestine-operations people had almost always overshadowed the analysts.

Having an analytical mind himself, Mr Turner tried to change this pattern in order to achieve a better finished product. One step towards this end was the famous 1977 “Hallowe’en massacre”, in which he cut some 820 jobs from the espionage branch. It has been widely criticised as having “wrecked” the agency. However, long before he arrived, the CIA was believed to be hugely overstaffed. He says that the espionage branch in particular was so top-heavy that many good young men were leaving because they could not see their way to the top, and so overmanned at all levels that on returning from overseas assignments many agents had to “walk the corridors” for months looking for something to do.

Although 820 was the number of authorised jobs that were cut, only 164 people were forced out (most of them pensioned off); of these, only 17 were fired. And few know how big the CIA was to start with: 164 may have been a fairly small percentage. Most bureaucracies become more

efficient when they are cut, and the CIA was probably no exception. The main objection (for which the author must and does take responsibility) was the callous, bureaucratic way in which notifications were made.

Outside the CIA, his troubles were mainly due to the turf-fights resulting from America’s over-complicated national intelligence organisation. Each military service has its own intelligence branch: the Pentagon has another for the defence department as a whole; the State Department has one; the FBI chases foreign spies; the air force runs the office that controls the reconnaissance satellites; the National Security Agency engages in electronic eavesdropping and tries to break codes; the CIA produces spies and “national” intelligence. And its boss is supposed not only to run it, but to co-ordinate its operations with those of all the other organisations as well, although he has little authority over them. Mercy!

Needless to say, there is too little co-ordination. By and large, the individual agencies go their own ways, and the system creaks along: co-operation is mainly a matter of horse-trading punctuated by compromise. To solve part of this problem, Mr Turner outlines a specific plan for the job of DCI to be hived off from that of director of the CIA. It is not a new idea, but it is so sensible that it is hard to fathom why it has not been done.

The author writes best about the theoretical discussion of the ethics, mechanics and politics of congressional supervision: the means by which the legislature, and through it, the body politic, maintain some sort of control over the CIA. He is clear that this kind of oversight is good not only for the country but for the intelligence organisations themselves. Nevertheless, he appears a bit uncertain when he comes to grips with the most vexed problem of all: how much to tell the overseers.